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Review article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17234/WPAS.2021.6

We Are the Stories We Tell: Pandemic Narratives and COVID-19

It is stating the obvious that the connection between fiction and pandemics runs impenetrably deep. The aim of the present paper is to provide a retrospective account of the import of pandemics (especially that of the plague at various points in history) in some notable works of literature and to survey its plausible kinship with new currents in the post-pandemic cultural and literary environment. In doing so, the essay strives to subject to critical assessment Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Camus's *The Plague*, where a mysterious pandemic is directly evoked. Additionally, the essay seeks to disclose the hypothetical "viral" subtexts of contagious diseases discernible in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, written at a time when the Spanish flu of 1918 – 19 began to take its toll. In the last section, the essay will introduce a series of possible themes and genres which are likely to have a bearing on the literary scene as a direct consequence of the current pandemic.

Key words: pandemics, modernism, genres, anxiety, body metaphor, virus/viral

"Disease – the dark side of life, hell on earth – is the recurring nightmare of much great fiction" (Healy 1). Since the early days of literature, there has been an artistic response to a variety of health crises crossing different

modes of literary production in both the Western and the non-Western world. The literary representation of infectious diseases, plagues, influenza, and smallpox are part of a long literary tradition. The current COVID-19 pandemic can be read as a sinister reminder of the material chaos of human existence, and hence as a means to set the wheels of artistic creativity into motion by generating a discursive narrative about the present mental, psychological, ethical, and intellectual implications dominating our socio-cultural landscape.

It is important to consider the impossibility and undesirability of an undertaking to envisage, particularly at an early juncture of the pandemic, a "coherent" body of COVID-19 literature; the response to it would be too varied, impetuous, and incomplete. Nevertheless, with such a disclaimer in mind, this essay will attempt to highlight some of the emergent literary and critical work in response to the disease, eschewing a conclusive statement regarding its future directions. The magnitude of the literary reaction to the coronavirus is likely to make it demanding for the scholar to tackle its implications to any significant capacity without "reconstruct[ing] diseases and diseased bodies in their social and historical contexts, and, through examining the culture's fictions about them, to elucidate representations of them in poems, pamphlets, and on the stage" (Healy 11–12).

The recurrence of a range of pandemics has been the *sujet* of much great fiction, which has often foregrounded the socio-culturally constructed justifications of disease and the major role literature could assume in the process. Similar to the scholarly discussions about the AIDS epidemic, the ongoing global events can be espoused as an epidemic that implies how our entire social order bears resemblance to an infected body. To my mind, Susan Sontag's description of "the struggle for rhetorical ownership" of illness (93) can be interpreted by considering the sick body as an overloaded political site, and our explanation about it represents vital consequences and lessons to learn both for individuals and for social groups. It will be shown that "[e]pidemics

by their very nature demand political responses and provide a good opportunity and rationale for intervention into the lives of others, for the re-ordering of bodies" (Healy 3) and the re-establishing of order.

Although several literary examples have been used throughout the centuries to illuminate how humanity's reactions to diseases have been incorporated into fiction, the present essay will speculate that – contrary to the popular opinion that original insights in COVID-19 fiction will be hard to create – our pandemic-impregnated culture shall contribute to the development of new genres, modes, and moods of expression, partially recognizing the fiasco of modern medicine and espousing instead the complex realities of human experience. While both fiction and non-fiction have been written about epidemic outbreaks and contagious diseases, it must be emphasized that the suitable paradigms established in connection with plague literature – highlighting affinities between the Great Plague of 1664–65 and the current pandemic – are clearly anachronistic to the postmodern reality of the twenty-first century. [1] To my mind, writing any fictional account about the horrifying aftermaths of COVID-19 is much more than an intertextual project: it has begun to take center stage as a *phenomenon of culture* situated in an intersecting area of discourse, which invites multidisciplinary and boundary-crossing theoretical approaches. In a manner similar to early modern English literature, "the postmodern condition is experienced in the academy today as a registering of doubt in relation to old epistemological frameworks" (Healy 236).

It must be stated at the outset that the ambiguity surrounding the murky literary terrain is partly generated by the social and emotional con-

1 In his seminal book, entitled *Bills of Mortality: Disease and Destiny in Plague Literature from Early Modern to Postmodern Times*, Patrick Reilly identifies the dynamics between the fact of the plague and the constructs of fate that deadly diseases generate in literary texts ranging from Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

sequences provoked by the disease, which might "effectively disintegrate the fabric of civilized society" (Healy 60). In a vein not dissimilar to the Jacobean and Elizabethan periods in English literature, which were known to be preoccupied with morbid aspects of dying and death, it seems that the *Zeitgeist* of our new historical era is encumbered with the anxieties a pandemic should inescapably produce.[2] Here, the word "anxiety" is fraught with ominous and disconcerting associations, the cause of which, alongside humanity's fragile existence and scarce medical and pharmacokinetic knowledge about the current disease and its recently released antidotes, lies in the fact that earlier epidemic outbreaks and contagious diseases with external bodily manifestations were authentically fictionalized in narrative prose.

Literary critics and latter-day doomsayers, roaming the information superhighway, have made sibyllic utterances about the specifics of a postapocalyptic landscape; yet it is imperative that one should, within a more plausible structure, develop an understanding of how to engage with new literary genres, forms, and themes during and after the pandemic. It is inevitable that the magnitude of the literary response to COVID-19 will be addressed by a diverse choir of voices. Instead of attempting to create an order in this diversity, this essay attempts to look at how the pandemic is likely to impact some aspects of literature in a "single planetary society," where all the barriers have vanished and the "unification of the world has passed the point of no return" (Toynbee 42). To demonstrate how earlier authors captured the impact and the moods of pandemics in elusive ways and indirect settings, it will be made clear that the metaphorical depiction of the pandemic, with its ephemeral

2 Healy provides an incomplete list of examples of the morbid aspects of dying in late Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas, where "evil, sin and vice are so closely associated with miasmic environments, vile smells, disease and dirt in late Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and satire" (36). In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, for example, King Harry warns of "the filthy and contagious clouds / Of heady murder, spoil, and villainy" (III. iii.114–15); and in *King John*, Salisbury cries, "Away with me, all you whose souls abhor / The uncleanly savours of a slaughter-house; for I am stifled with this smell of sin" (IV. iii.111–13).

details, can provide a more lasting influence on the psyche and human relationships.

To achieve this goal, this essay seeks to accentuate the role of pandemics in history and their emergence as a literary theme, a body metaphor, a political and social rhetoric, and a linguistic construct. Humanity's early reactions to COVID-19 will be considered in light of the plague narratives in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Daniel Defoe's *The Journal of the Plague Year*, and Albert Camus's *The Plague*; additionally, it will embrace the challenge of demonstrating how the Spanish flu of 1918, comparable in size and consequences to COVID-19, has been used (to a much lesser degree than its predecessors) as a representative example to reflect on the lives and literary output of Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot, both of whom were personally affected by the destructive malaise to such a degree that the atmosphere of influenza and illness faintly penetrate the textures of their major works. These early examples of pandemic-impregnated literature will lead me to consider the largely hypothetical directions of literary genres and themes in a post COVID-19 era.

Aladár Sarbu rightly claims that "[m]yths survive for a long time after they had outlived their original usefulness" (114). One would not have been labelled imprudent to claim, prior to the current pandemic, that humanities in general are endangered, and the statements made to this effect, at the very least, present a mournful portrait. It can be safely made explicit that the present woes of the study of humanities are in no way attributable to an earlier popular myth, known as the death of the Gutenberg Galaxy, which gained popular currency through Marshal McLuhan's prophetic book bearing the same title in 1962. McLuhan discusses media as part of a broader cultural and societal change, which generates a "secondary oral tradition" (45) and causes books to disappear. Contrary to McLuhan's prediction that visual, individualistic print culture would come to an end through what he called "electronic interdependence" (78), one cannot but realize with a modicum of incredulity that paper consumption per capita in America exceeds 700 pounds in a year.

In the end, we have seen that, despite McLuhan's prediction, the book did not die, but human existence in turn had to cope with yet another great adversity.

In the present context, myth is treated as source material for literature functioning as a guide to the underlying structures of human experience and serving as a mold or substratum to help us create an order to which we can all safely relate. It seems pertinent to consider myth as an important resource of literature, resonating vigorously in T. S. Eliot's description of Joyce's "mythic" method, according to which the use of myth is "simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177). The roots of our desired order during these trying times can be detected in Matthew Arnold's critical work, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in which he subjects his society to scrutiny in nineteenth-century England, which he knew like the back of his hand; he believed that the only way for his society to eschew anarchy was to endorse the dissemination of culture, which he defined with a great deal of superiority as "the study of perfection" (22).

In one of his vatic statements in the *Financial Times*, Yuval Noah Harari, author of the bestselling *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, optimistically argues that all recent epidemics in the world have been professionally eliminated. To this effect, he points out that "[w]hen choosing between alternatives, we should ask ourselves not only how to overcome the immediate threat, but also what kind of world we will inhabit once the storm passes. Yes, the storm will pass, humankind will survive, most of us will still be alive – but we will inhabit a different world" (17). While Harari's projection may turn out to be wide of the mark, his predictions are nonetheless reassuring as they portray not only an ideal picture of how all of us are craving to see a virus-free future world, the author also identifies the impulses behind the odd tableaux of life, which will be checkered with annoyances, such as the "soap police" and the "under-the-skin surveillance." Fear-provoking as Harari's version of the new world order sounds, some solace can be found in a "global plan" (Ha-

rari) that bridges the gap between nationalist isolation and global solidarity. Aside from Harari's journalistic gimmicks and self-styled status as a latter-day Cassandra, one should concur with the idea that all the various traits of human nature – encapsulated in the Modern Everyman, the archetypal human – emerge at the time of any crisis with their best coping mechanisms – moral or immoral, demonic or angelic, selfless or altruistic, and so forth. One thing is for certain: since time immemorial, human beings have responded to crises in similar fashion; hence all the minute details which create a visible kinship between pandemic literatures written centuries apart from one another.

Even the earliest writings in English-language literature invite the reader to dwell upon the primordial fear of humans toward infections. History has provided humanity with a colorful display of calamities, during which humanity had to fight with an invisible world of organisms. With later advancements in science and biology, the organisms remained invisible or unseen to the naked eye, but the mechanisms of disease transmission were clearly seen and understood (Riva et al.). At the outset, human beings associated these lethal maladies and their sudden outbreak to magic, superstition, the evil eye, or the wrath of gods, offenses against divinities, and the like.[3] Humanity's long-held beliefs in the supernatural or religious origins of pandemics were later counterweighted by better-informed societies which placed the roots of pandemics on secular grounds. While early Greek literature (Homer's *Iliad*, for example) emphasizes the possible repercussions of immoral or iniquitous

3 In the Bible, which has been considered as a book of perennial guidance since its inception, the plague ominously appears as God's wrath against humanity or as a warning sign to mend people's ways. Exodus 9:14: "or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth." Samuel 4:8: "We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness." Psalms 89:23: "And I will beat down his foes before his face, and plague them that hate him." See also: Numbers 11:33 and Isaiah 9:13. This causal relationship between man's sinful nature and God's wrath in the form of a disease can be found scattered throughout the Holy Scripture.

behavior, it is later refuted on the grounds that the "plague did not discriminate between the good and the evil but brought about the loss of all social conventions and a rise in selfishness and avarice" (Riva et al.).

Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) makes for an interesting case study: his young storytellers manage to while away their confinement by narrating drawn-out, erotic, and bawdy tales to one another in an enchanted garden of earthly delights. It stands out (aside from its known literary merits as a major influence on Western literature) as a quintessential collection of stories that observes the oral tradition of storytelling, which enjoyed its vogue particularly in the Middle Ages. In addition to some facetious aspects of Boccaccio's *chef d'oeuvre*, it must also be borne in mind that most of the tales were instrumental in the development of the novel as a genre by elevating prose to become a primary vehicle for literary works. Some of the tales stand out due to their philosophical complexities, which renders *Decameron* the central work in shaping a European humanist literary culture through mediation between cultures (classical and medieval, Latin, French, and Italian) and religions (Christian and pagan).

One fascinating aspect to which Boccaccio resorts is that the self-imposed quarantine for the characters is an opportunity to laugh and stay merry while confining themselves (both literally and figuratively) from the outside world, where the plague is wreaking havoc. Most importantly, however, the veritable panacea is tucked away within the stories, because "by its very nature narrative is reassuring" (Jenkinson). It is stating the obvious that the power of storytelling for the individual and the world at large transcends many limitations as it helps to lift anxiety related to a previous trauma. Such storytelling, primarily due to the modern contrivances surrounding us, would seem somewhat absurd in our age as we attempt to restore order internally (both inside the quarantine and in the psyche of modern man); nevertheless, similar patterns are re-enacted today with the rising interest in television series, which serve as a contemporary alternative to Boccaccio's traditional ways of

recounting the stories. Besides the grimmer aspects of the plague, *Decameron* has become a prominent text in sculpting the vernacular that was later picked up by the masses in Italy. Added to the much-admired magnetism of Boccaccio's text (its occasional lewdness and enduring poeticism) is his crowning achievement – and, of course, that of Dante and Petrarch – in fixing the form of the Italian literary language through his use of the Tuscan vernacular, which appealed to the populace of the time.

In Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), "[m]any families, foreseeing the approach of the distemper laid up stores of provisions sufficient for their whole families and shut themselves up, and that so entirely, that they were neither seen or heard until the infection was quite eased" (75). The novel, which provides an accurate account of the bubonic plague in Marseille in 1720 and recounts events of the Great Plague that struck London six decades earlier, also serves as an exemplum that only after the radical times of crises are over will creative human potential begin to burgeon and embrace the mind's contemplations of its past tribulations. Commentators on plague writing often present conflicting views as to whether the plague or any lethal pandemic can invigorate artistic creativity. Jennifer Cooke considers the plague as an impairment of one's creative genius in writing so much so that even "traditional forms of informative writing" collapse. She writes that "under its [the plague's] conditions, language is tired, lacking the descriptive vitality which would take it beyond a mere factual listing of occurrences. The physical and emotional effects of fighting plague enervate and enfeeble language itself" (Cooke 35).

In this relation, Patrick Reilly states on a more positive note that "however unsettling a graphically detailed narrative of horrors *Journal* may be, it is also an edifying tale of survival and, implicitly, of triumph" (13). Defoe's work has provoked a resurgence of interest in plague-impregnated literature during COVID-19, which is partly due to the fact that our response to pandemics can be a source of inspiration for new works during the cur-

rent pandemonium. Margaret Healy also supports this argument by stating that plague writing can be seen as an artistic egress for those who are affected by its horrors: "On a more upbeat celebratory note . . . a number of English critics have accorded plague a positive, enabling function in relation to art: 'art—in the face of the greatest horrors (plague, the slave-trade, the death-camps)—may be obliged by indirections to *find directions out*'" (15 – 16, emphasis added).

Therefore, it goes without saying that, according to Reilly and Healy, pandemics can serve as productive and even entertaining topics themselves. Works inspired by an epidemic outbreak are unlikely to immediately engender high-quality literary prose narrative, which authentically documents events, as the oozing lacerations caused by the trauma do not *instantaneously* allow for the creative mind to fictionalize real-life events in stimulating ways. Horrid as the term "oozing lacerations" might sound in the present non-medical context, it is important to note that lacerations as opposed to wounds or cuts more pertinently represent the corporeal manifestations of the pandemic due to their irregular sizes and shapes – very much akin to the volatile and irregular circumstances under which the virus spreads or affects one's immune system. Cooke draws a striking parallel between the manner of dying and one's inability to produce written work: "The choked lungs and coagulated veins of the pneumonic and septicaemic strains of plague which obstruct the usual free flow of blood have a penmanship counterpart in the common enough metaphor of writing as a process of flow and its clogging as writer's block" (33).

On one last note to the novel, it is important to remember that Defoe completed his *Journal* in hindsight. He provided his readers with an instant book, amassing statistical data, reminiscences, gossips, anecdotes, and eyewitness accounts, as the author was too young at the time of the calamity to note down particulars of the event. It is interesting to observe that the social and political fabric between Defoe's *Journal* and COVID-19 share numerous

affinities. Defoe's narrator (identifying himself only as the mysterious H. F.) remarks that catching the plague would cause the most serious of repercussions in human relationships, as a warning mark would be installed at the doors of the infected. The theme of stigmatization in literary texts is a recurring phenomenon, which often presents itself through metaphorical usage. Jennifer Cooke accentuates that

> time and again, plague is wielded as a political or rhetorical weapon in the service of social discrimination or stigmatisation; it is mobilised to critique regimes, dictators or minority groups. Used in this way, plague is frequently accompanied by the powerful 'body metaphor', which renders a state, nation, or people the 'body' that can be labelled 'sick' or 'healthy', thus making it, with plague alongside, a convenient vector for political and social rhetoric. (2)

Such political rhetoric is discernable in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-Mark" (1843), where the dermatological anomaly represents imperfection to be rectified, while the letter 'A' of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by the same author is generally understood to stand for adultery, among several other plausible readings. While neither the birthmark nor the attached letter on Hester Prynne's dress are contagious in the virological sense of the word, they do spread a set of virulent ideas about one's perception of womanhood, which will make a character pilloried and shunned. All in all, it must be stressed that *A Journal* is an important work of literature, for it highlights that in addition to sharing stories as a means to connect with one another, it can also facilitate the healing process through the act of constructing a new narrative, which deliberately recoils from discussing the fear-inducing minutiae that literally plagues the city.

The Plague, written by Albert Camus in 1947, about the inconspicuous appearance of a lethal virus, which works its way virulently through the human population of the Algerian coastal town of Oran, features a scenario

reminiscent of the current pandemic with economic restrictions, quarantine, lockdowns, and various forms of isolation. Since its publication, the novel has been overburdened with myths, prophesies, and a plethora of speculations – which have or have not stood the test of time and has understandably become a highly venerated work of art at the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Camus' description of the plague-ridden, treeless, dreary, and soulless city of Oran is similar to the apocalyptic landscapes one would detect all around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> Gasoline was rationed and restrictions were placed on the sale of foodstuffs. Reductions were ordered in the use of electricity. Only necessaries were brought by road or air to Oran. Thus the traffic thinned out progressively until hardly any private cars were on the roads; luxury shops closed overnight, and others began to put up "Sold Out" notices, while crowds of buyers stood waiting at their doors. (63)

General readers have somewhat mistakenly interpreted the author's intent of writing *The Plague* as an extended metaphor to address any contagion that might ravage society and take a deadly toll. Camus had experienced first-hand the onslaught of Nazi troops in Paris in 1940, which obviously enabled him to detect affinities between physical and psychological infection. It seems unlikely that Camus – who had suffered from tuberculosis himself and understood the virulence of illness as a juggernaut force – chose to degrade the corporeal manifestations of the plague to a metaphor. While I do not reject the idea that *The Plague* cannot be read as a conscious manifesto of Fascism, Nazism, or any form of dehumanizing totalitarian regime, it seems more pertinent to the present line of argumentation to disencumber the novel from any obvious ideological burdens, that is to say, to remove it from a given historical context. Stephen Metcalf is right in claiming that "Camus was uninterested in self-mythologizing as he was in anatomizing the fascist mentality. The Nazis were not evil because they occupied an extreme position on the political spectrum but because they were enemies of *life itself*" (Metcalf). Even though Camus knew

full well the magnitude of human catastrophe that the plague had the ability to cause, he was convinced, through his unique blend of humanist and existentialist philosophy, that the all-legitimizing abstractions and moral theories spreading in the world are the reason behind what he recurrently describes as an absurd death sentence, in the shadow of which human beings live. It might not be fallacious to allude to how Camus himself described what the plague was to symbolize years before the inception of his novel: "I want to express by means of the plague the suffocation which we have all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we all lived. I want at the same time to extend that interpretation to the notion of existence in general" (qtd. in Foley 52).

Able to transfigure human bodies and put an end to life, the plague in Camus is also capable of drawing attention to a discernable kinship between the fictional events described in the novel and the current real-life pandemic. In the early days of the plague, the citizens of Oran are depicted as members of a society who display as much apathy and as little forbearance for "collective" suffering as those individuals of COVID-19 who self-interestedly believed that their pain was exclusive and all too unique to be experienced by others. Identifying the plague or any pandemic as a common concern of humankind is an important element of the novel, as one is eventually let off with the caveat that any attempt to evade death by fleeing the city is rendered pointless and equal to the horrors humankind must bear in the face of life's absurdities. Nevertheless, the novel emphasizes that rebelling against death should be interpreted as a noble and profound struggle even if all attempts are in vain. In one way or another, *The Plague* is imbued with the author's conviction that optimism must persevere even in times of collective suffering and hopelessness. Camus describes the plague in cold aloofness toward human bathos by enumerating sheer facts, figures, medical reports, and authority measures in order to create an air of dispassionate authenticity. The novel's climax, which is marked by the death-throes of Othon's son, brings all the characters together at one point of time only to concede that the plague and

its harrowing effects constitute a common concern for humanity.

In the novel, the plague passes, the city of Oran is liberated, and the only concern for the citizens is to come to an understanding of what has happened. Even if *The Plague* is sometimes seen through the microscopic lens as an allegory of the French experience under occupation, there is no denying that lesser-known writers of what Grace Dillon calls "indigenous futurism" (12) believe that "[many] speculative fiction stories, whether set in space or in a postapocalyptic future, derive their plots from a colonial perspective" (Walsh 116). In formerly colonized countries, such as Algeria, but much more so in Sub-Saharan Africa, the apocalypse had already dawned on humanity, as pandemics – both literal and metaphorical – have imposed their own restrictions on different populations, repressed people's feelings, and created an air of permanent fear.[4]

I believe that reading plague-related literature of the past is not only to look for the devil in the grim details as mental charts are drawn up to highlight the analogies between "them" and "us." Instead, one should also read these books in a larger context: the fact alone that the novel did not die is as an indication that humanity must continue to act in solidarity to conquer fear and anxiety associated with the incomprehensibility that pandemics trigger. Indeed, many works of pandemic literature offer catharsis and relief in their denouement; since most of the texts are rife with the realities of the pandemic and apocalypse conditions, it only comes naturally that humanity will theorize alternative social structures and mull over the possibilities that literature offers in the way of narrating personal accounts and consider the

4 It might be relevant in the present context to consider the metaphorical dimensions of the plague. Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Masque of the Red Death" is a fine elaboration of the plague *topos* by including a mysterious masked man in the narrative, who appears as the embodiment of the plague. Prince Prospero's "masked ball of unusual magnificence" (197) is a reminder of the ubiquity of death and of the equality of all men in that state. Poe's modern and literal manifestation of the *danse macabre* is a way to indicate that people do not die from the plague, but that "people are plagued by death" (Riva et al.).

historicity of the pandemic an emotional and aesthetic projection of hitherto constrained emotions.

The works of Boccaccio, Defoe, and Camus, which were tangentially dealt with in the foregoing analyses, reiterate a prescient warning for generations to come by providing a truthful account of humanity's plausible reaction in similar future crises; at the same time, it becomes clear that scientific thinking alone falls short of being the sole cure to fight the plague or come to terms with its devastating enormity. Cooperation among human beings and the expression of solidarity are something of a humanized *vade mecum*, which seek to guide one away from the rigid boundaries of science alone. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Wells' *Doctor Moreau*, or Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," though featuring fictional characters, are prototypes of the mad scientists who not only mishandle laboratory experiments out of malice or naiveté, but also endanger humanity like illnesses or epidemics. In earlier times, human reactions to infectious diseases, followed by the devastating defeat of medicine and scientific progress, varied widely (ranging from emotional, to cognitive, to psychological and behavioral responses), but one commonality that bygone eras and our present-day calamities have is a deeply rooted fear of death regardless of how much science understands about contagions and their spread or how effectively governments put measures in place to curb the death toll. On this note, it seems wise to say that science, as has been demonstrated throughout Covid-19, can either be a glimmer of hope or a destructive force, which causes societies to collapse under the weight of the rapidly changing information emanating from the impact of the media.

In his article on the relationship between virus and viral, Zach Blas states that our current societies can be aptly characterized through the emergence of viral theories, which constitute the "major trope of the postmodern condition" (29). Furthermore, he makes a stimulating observation as he tackles a "dizzying array of viralities" proliferating in the world:

> The viral emphasizes *a break, or rupture, between fiction and reality that is hazy, fluid, unstable*. Imitations of the virus, commonly labeled "viral," are more like creative openings into fictions or poetics of the virus. These framings of the virus are unhuman, and unhuman politics is a framing for the examination of the overlappings, differences, and irreducibilities—mediations—of the virus and the viral. (30, emphases added)

Reading for the pandemic in the time of modernism allows the inquisitive scholar to glimpse at a patch of land that has been suspiciously left fallow over the past one hundred years. Elizabeth Outka's pivotal book, entitled *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* and (puzzlingly) published just before the COVID-19 outbreak, sets its sights on the literary world during and after the Spanish flu of 1918 – 19 and has for its governing principle the same fluidity and rupture in her fresh approach to works widely subjected to earlier criticism. Studies generally suggest that World War I left England and much of Europe in a physically and emotionally immobilized condition, disfigured by social turmoil, civil unrest, decimated families and a *Weltanschauung* that can hardly be described as Panglossian.

Consequently, it is stating the obvious that some modernist texts abound in alarming images of shattered lives as well as psychologically unhinged and alienated characters, who have lost their virility to reproduce and their *joie de vivre* to return to the existential plane they used to inhabit. Any association with the unspeakable horrors of the war are ceaselessly quoted as the veritable *raison d'être* behind the deranged psyche of humanity in the interwar period. Outka's take on the works of some emblematic representatives of modernist literature is original in the sense that it investigates the modernist mystery of why the deadly Spanish flu, despite its massive, inexorable force, made so few appearances in the British, Irish and American literatures of the period. It is believed that a conspicuous literary and critical silence ensued after the pandemic, the reason for which might have to do with Cooke's assumption that the pandemic "alters the ability of people to speak of the hor-

ror of their experiences" (33). It is only now that scholars become conscious of the fact that assumptions about modernism in English and American culture and literature change when the devastation of the pandemic begins to generate a discursive narrative. Outka calls it "the era's viral catastrophe" (2) and claims that the erasure of the pandemic from later critical assessment is often senselessly outweighed by military conflicts. She comments as follows:

> When we fail to read for illness in general and the 1918 pandemic in particular, we reify how military conflict has come to define history, we deemphasize illness and pandemics in ways that hide their threat, and we take part in long traditions that align illness with seemingly less valiant, more feminine forms of death (2).

In spite of the fact that the Spanish flu came to a halt, its traces can be found everywhere in the literature and the culture of the time through subtextual evocation. Outka believes that these traces are intrinsic to the pandemic's literary representations, paradoxically captured in gaps, silences, atmospheres, fragments, barrenness, and hidden bodies (2). Through her analyses of the works of T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, the author rejuvenates an already existing pandemic canon, which bears the hallmarks of isolation, fear, and disruption. Outka is right in claiming that all these hallmarks are an expression of the horrific aftermath of the Spanish flu, which both Eliot and Woolf present through the changing moods, eerie atmospheres, and bodily disfigurations in their iconic works. Outka is mindful not to hastily plump for the conclusion that either the pandemic or World War I is categorically and unilaterally responsible for giving rise to the most recognizable elements of modernist style; yet, she cogently argues how the influenza was a primary factor in contributing to the decaying cultural atmosphere of the time, which she describes through the notions of disorientation, alienation, and fragmentation. In her scrupulously detailed close-reading of *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), she stresses that reading these texts with-

out the aforesaid historical framing is impossible. Outka perceives the consequences of influenza, its lasting neurological damage, and its psychological distortions. In her reading, *The Waste Land* is "infuse[d] with the miasmic residue" (Outka 145) of the influenza, while *Mrs. Dalloway* portrays Woolf's innovative rhetoric in remapping London through illness and showing how language and our perceptions of reality can be shaped by the disease.

While Eliot never manifestly mentions the pandemic in the text, he represents the pandemic in *The Waste Land* "as a powerful record of [its] enduring emotional costs, as well as a record of denial that surrounded it even as the culture remained mired in the guilt, suffering, and fear it produced" (Outka 144). His decision not to name the pandemic in the poem is attributable to his credo meticulously expounded on in his "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), where he emphasizes the significance of "impersonal poetry." In it, he says that "the progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (qtd. in Cianci and Harding 132). In other words, the poet's emotions and passions must be depersonalized; he must be as impersonal and objective as a scientist. Outka aptly comments that Eliot's poem "A Note on War Poetry" is key to understanding his artistic creed of excluding personal elements from poetry. Some of Outka's arguments in relating the fragmentary aspects of the poem to the pandemic are disturbingly expressive: fever, infection, delirium, threat of drowning, burials, resurrections, silence, and lethargy are all part of the pandemic landscape.

Mrs. Dalloway can also be read as a novel on influenza despite the apparent lack of direct references to it. While Woolf focuses on the suffering and the plight of two individuals (Clarissa and Septimus), the ubiquity of illness seems to loom large in the background. Outka aptly claims – and in doing so, she emphasizes the "hazy, fluid and unstable break between fiction and reality" (Blas 30) – that Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique is seldom if ever associated with the spreading of the influenza, though the central role of the fluidity of the narrative engenders the virus to reach the novel's

every nook and cranny from a textual point of view. The structure in which the narrative is embedded creates the ideal form to represent the pandemic's presence. Clarissa is depicted as an obvious influenza survivor, who succeeds in living a comfortable life, but harbors deep secrets in her past, while Septimus has suffered a dual tragedy in his life, which leaves an imprint both on his body and his mind. Outka explains that

> [t]he war . . . left lasting physical and mental scars on bodies. The 1918 virus, through other means, not only did long-term damage to the body's systems; it could also produce profound psychological damage (as Woolf and her doctors knew well). This damage was not simply from the trauma of the near-death experience (which is largely the trauma Clarissa seems affected by) but from neurological effects ranging from delirium to psychosis. (105)

To my mind, the broken world of England gravitates toward a wasteland of illnesses caused by the influenza outbreak. My approach to include this significant addition to my analysis on the prospects of post COVID-19 literature was to demonstrate how writing or simply intimating bodily or mental illnesses can serve as an agglutinative device in structuring the plot, peopling the narratives with characters and voices (the latter being the case in point concerning *The Waste Land*), with whom readers can easily identify; however, most importantly, these texts of shattered lives show how the pandemic experience can serve as a subtle yet formidable subtext of artistic expression. Furthermore, my own analysis and an incomplete précis of Outka's monograph also engage with the context of the present paper. In short, Eliot's recognition that multiple voices featuring different social strata can commodiously coexist in a broken literary world and Woolf's narrative and thematic gift of paving the way for the middlebrow Septimus and the upper-class Clarissa to cross paths at the novel's closure all show that both writers – alongside a handful of other modernist figures – epitomize the spirit of solidarity of the modernist vanguard much before the COVID-19 outbreak. Reading her engaging (though slightly speculative) study about the faint echoes of the Spanish flu

in modernist literature, one cannot help wondering what aesthetic forms will engulf literature that emerges from the current pandemic onward.

Early at the outset of COVID-19, the question of how the pandemic will affect literature, literary trends, and themes, as well as the vantage ground upon which literature has perched for centuries, was contingent on bafflement, ludicrous hypotheses, and (as it seems now) forlorn hope. Literary texts are likely to gain creative inspiration from the circumstantial realities most human beings undergo at this juncture of history. In a similar vein to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, which is often classified as "literature of crisis," one might find it fitting to conclude that formal similarities, ideological kinships, and spiritual connections among different types of writing produced during historical moments of crises will be detectable in future literature (Payne and Barbera 21). In terms of classification and genre, literature dealing with COVID-19 and its aftermath will be problematic to append to a fixed, already existing label lest literary scholars should either establish novel categories or force the new fictional products into an iron-bound Procrustean bed. Literature is likely to give rise to works in disfigured or altered frames, while attempts to revivify the obsolete and the conventional might also be on the rise. Regardless of the inconsistencies in finding one single mode of literary expression, it can be intuited that all new forms of written expression will endorse the complex realities of human experience, inviting the reader "to reflect on the ancestral fear of humans toward infectious diseases" (Riva et al.). Anachronistic to the postmodern reality of COVID-19, earlier modes of narration fall short of emphasizing the newness and the singularity of our times.

In his highly controversial manifesto on ushering in postmodern fiction in the early sixties and the hurriedly foretelling the exhaustion of literature, John Barth assertively discusses the "used-upness" (17) of earlier novelistic forms and confirms that metafiction is one way for the novelist to respond to this predicament. "Barth was certainly right to proclaim in his essay that this

state of exhaustion was no cause for despair, and recent literary history has vindicated the claim that the exhausted possibilities of the novel have proved a source of vitality in fiction" (Currie 161). In a similar manner to Barth's purported exhaustion of literary realism, our current quest for new forms, content, and genres will eventually triumph despite the fact that readers are prone to believe that literary themes at the time of the pandemic have petered out. Yet, as Barth's criteria of predictive accuracy about the exhaustion of literature turned out to be faulty, it seems that the post-pandemic period will bring fewer novelties than one might surmise; instead, it will continue producing works in a similar, postmodern vein, with its trajectory left radically unscathed by the aftermaths of the COVID-19 pandemic. Literature will continue offering a motley assortment of genres and subgenres, including fictionalized autobiographical memories, instances of conspiracy literature, ecological fiction, and an ever-growing number of SF texts. In her exploratory article on the new artistic and cultural landscape to unfold after the pandemic is over, Nadia Anwar provides a list of plausibly emerging literary genres and themes, which she believes will help literature thrive, replenish, and develop into a new, timeless, transcultural, spontaneous, and original epoch of creative thinking. Even though Anwar's article makes for compelling reading, it is certainly too slim on critical theory to constitute a solid basis for justifiable arguments.

It has been set out at the beginning of this essay that its findings would not be recklessly conclusive in providing inadequate evidence or *disclosing* (mark the coincidental resonance with the Greek word "apocalypse") doom-laden visions of the world or minatory prophesies of humanity's greatest quandary. Earlier literature, at the time of seventeenth-century plagues and even later, when the Spanish flu hit Europe, has ably demonstrated that the pestilence would cause mayhem outlasting its indomitability. It has been convincingly argued that the narratives written during crisis with a focus on the post-apocalyptic aftermath have endeavored to facilitate an exploration of what humanity might be like without the support of civilization. Should our

current societies weather the storm without the redeeming power of some form of culture (be it mainstream or subaltern), it can be safely predicted – along with the somewhat *passé* qualms formulated by Matthew Arnold – that civilization might lapse into anarchy in the Hobbesian sense of the word.

In order to prevent the eruption of social upheaval, mob rule, racial segregation, the rise of the restless proletariat, and the extolment of demagogues, literature might, *inter alia*, represent humanity's egress from the ruthless indifference one could experience at the onslaught of COVID-19. If the inverse should happen, urban population density is likely to lend itself to the pandemic and suffer all its consequences. In almost the same breath, it must be emphasized that the devastation that follows the pandemic is both to be loathed and welcomed at the same time. Class and racial barriers are demolished (consider, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement and its global spread), and the coveted oneness in a "single planetary society" (Toynbee 44) should ideally come into existence; however, it must also be loathed as such destruction might as well bring civilization, as we know it, to a standstill. No matter what guise literature happens to don, its primary function should be in its ability to produce genuine works of art, retain the humanity's moral fiber, respect its subject-matter and raise serious issues of an enduring nature. One should be ready to make one's peace with the platitudinous holy cow of our time, namely "solidarity" that transgresses boundaries, unites people and ideas, reconciles, and commiserates.

For readers of literature, what may call for herculean resilience is to accept that in the post COVID-19 era, the systematically fashioned relationship between reality and literature might change. The change, substantial as it is, will be perceptible in how the reader embarks upon the consumption of a literary product, elements of which might reflect their own abject reality of loss, isolation, agony, and solitude. One should be mindful not to leave unnoticed the topicality of Kurtz's eerily sonorous howl in *Heart of Darkness*:

"the horror, the horror." Joseph Conrad's imperial romance is equipped with a multiplicity of meanings, none of which is more suggestive than the dying Kurtz's clarion call he issues for the sake of humanity's continued existence beyond his physical and spiritual horrors. Despite the ordeal humanity has intimately got to know since January 2020, inspirational lessons, added to the bitterest ones, have been learned. The stories that have been devoured during confinements, quarantines, and travel restrictions clearly delineate how literature can shape what it means to be human, because, after all, we are the stories we tell to overcome the pandemic and reassess our own core values.

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